

## **MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE: MY SPIRITUALITY**

**An Address by Christopher Page at St. John the Divine, Victoria  
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### **Introduction**

Harold Munn has impeccable timing. When he called to invite me to give this address, he caught me at a weak moment. I had just finished four months of sabbatical study leave. I was feeling refreshed, invigorated, full of energy, vitality, and creativity. I could take on any challenge. So, of course, when Harold called and asked would I speak at Noon Forum on “My Spirituality” I jumped at the opportunity.

That was four months ago. Today, the prospect of standing up and speaking to a group of intelligent, inquisitive, possibly sceptical people about “My Spirituality” seems a little daunting. Such an exercise is simply fraught with perils.

To speak about “My Spirituality” requires a delicate balancing act. On one hand I might portray myself in such glowing terms that, in the question period at the end of this talk, the first question will come from my wife who will jump to her feet and ask some version of “Who exactly have you been talking about for the last thirty minutes?”

On the one hand, it is tempting to concentrate so obsessively on my weaknesses and shortcomings that you will wonder why on earth Harold ever bothered inviting me to give this talk or why you ever bothered wasting your time coming to listen.

So, in an attempt to avoid both these dangers, let me begin this talk with a short disclaimer. Let me say first of all, that I am going to try to be honest in this address. I am going to try to look seriously inside my own heart and see what I

really find there in the dark hidden corners of my being. But then let me also say that, if I speak at all glowingly of the spiritual life as I have discovered it, I remain deeply aware of how far short I fall in fulfilling the vision of life to which I believe I am called.

I think the poet Wendell Berry was deeply aware of the tension I have identified in my struggle to speak about “My Spirituality.” He speaks of it powerfully in his poem “A Warning to My Readers” which I would like to read as a kind of apologetic for this entire enterprise of attempting to speak about “My Spirituality.” Berry writes:

Do not think me gentle  
because I speak in praise  
of gentleness, or elegant  
because I honor the grace  
that keeps this world.

I am a man crude as any,  
gross of speech, intolerant,  
stubborn, angry, full  
of fits and furies.

And so I speak now, in praise of a life to which I aspire, but which I live inadequately.

### **To Be A Child**

I am a fifty-five year old male. Although I am reasonably fit and in relatively good health, I am almost certainly further away from the day of my birth than from the day on which I will die. I have lived more years than I have left to live. This gives me occasion to wonder what all those years I have lived so far have really amounted to.

I have been married to the same woman for thirty-two years. No doubt most of the credit rightly lies with her - patient, angelic saint that she is. But perhaps I might lay claim to at least a little relational success in my life.

Our children are successfully launched into adulthood as beautiful and gracious young women. And, although, I adore their company, I do not fool myself that they really need me any longer.

My next major professional accomplishment may well be beginning to collect back some of that pension I have been paying into so faithfully for the past thirty years, if there is anything left in my pension fund.

I have had my share of failures; I have lapsed more times than I care to recall from the ideals I cherish. I have been foolish at times, arrogant, ignorant, stupid, self-willed, petty, and mean. I have harboured resentments and too often clutched my pain to my chest as if it were some prized possession.

More seldom than I wish I have been gentle and kind. But, on the whole, I have not loved easily. It has taken a granddaughter to truly pry open the rusty hinges on my stiffened old heart.

And that perhaps is where the story of “My Spirituality” might best begin. It is perhaps the place where all stories of Christian spirituality should begin – with a child.

Jesus, who was once a child himself of course, said, “***unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.***” (Matthew 18:3) The noun translated here from Greek to English as “children” is *paidia*.

“Children” is an adequate translation. But it would be better to translate *paidia* as “infant.”

***“Unless you change and become like infants, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”*** To be an infant is to be powerless, vulnerable and weak. To be an infant is to live in a world you cannot hope to control, a world that is sometimes threatening and in which you know yourself to be small and at risk.

Herein lies the fundamental problem of “My Spirituality” – I do not want to be powerless; I do not want to be small, or at risk. I spend my life trying to avoid feeling vulnerable and weak. I want to be strong, capable, and in control. Even more, I want you to look at me and think that I am competent, smart and talented. I desperately want to convince you that I never feel insecure or unsure of myself. I want you to believe that I know how the world works and can get along very well without your help thank you very much.

I think perhaps I am not alone in struggling with embracing my weakness. I think it is partly why men find it difficult to ask directions and seldom stop to read the instructions. I don’t want you to know that half the time I feel lost and do not know how life works.

Sadly, when I am honest, I know you are not convinced, or if you are, I know that it is only because I have fooled you for a minute. And, no matter how many people I may have fooled, I have certainly never managed to convince myself. I have lived long enough to plumb the depths of the extraordinary limitations of my ability to control anything. I struggle every day with my insecurities. I spend hours feeling the need to protect myself from some hostile force, and wishing I could find some way to avoid the inevitable pain that being alive seems to carry.

If the second half of life has convinced me of anything, it has convinced me that any spirituality that is honest and human must acknowledge the wisdom of the Buddha who taught that the first noble truth is that life involves suffering. Jesus made the same point when with a cheerful smile he announced to his followers, ***“In this world you will have trouble.”*** (John 16:33 NIV)

Perhaps it seems a gloomy starting point; but it is the only place I know to begin. It is the only place I know that is real. In fact, as I look out at the world, it seems increasingly clear to me that we do the most damage when we start to believe in the illusion of our own power and control over the forces of life.

The other day in Sunday School at the church where I am privileged to work, the children were creating things out of Styrofoam. Actually mostly they were just breaking up the Styrofoam and having a wonderful time creating a great mess and covering themselves in little bits of flaky white Styrofoam crumbles. We are a lot like those children. With our plastic hammer, our toy saw, and our Styrofoam, we struggle to build a house to live in.

Every step of the way, “My Spirituality” has involved struggle. I struggle with myself; with the people I know and love the best, with people I have never even met. I struggle with the person in the check out line in front of me at the express register who has fifteen items instead of the ten the sign says he is allowed. I struggle with the world I read about in the newspaper every day. I struggle with the violence I can’t avoid seeing. I struggle with military intervention, with earthquakes, poverty, starvation, and injustice. I struggle with institutions that seem so tragically broken and so often abusive to the people they were created to serve. I struggle with the church in which I have worked full-time for the past thirty years. I struggle with myself.

I stand with Jacob who the writer of Genesis says, “*was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak.*” (Genesis 32:24) Jacob limped away from that conflict with his hip wrenched out of joint and had his name changed to “*Israel,*” which means “*he struggles with God.*” Imagine a nation named “*he struggles with God*” – a nation that enshrines at the core of its identity the reality that life is hard.

There is no escaping the reality. Life as we experience it in this world is broken. We all limp. Things do not work all that well. The world is a confusing and troublesome place.

Strangely, Jesus suggests, this difficult place is the place of hope. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, “*Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.*” (Luke 6:20) This is not a naïve glorification of poverty. It is an acknowledgement that, when we are in need, there is a potential for something within us to open. When we acknowledge that we have come to the end of our very limited resources it becomes possible that a new dimension may open within us. When we come to the end of our resources, there is a chance we may see that there is more to this life than meets the eye.

This I have found to be true. It is not my wealth that has caused my heart to break open. It is not my talents, or my strengths that have caused me to find the divine strength and wisdom I believe are the presence of God at the heart of my being. No, my life has cracked open to new depth when I have taken the place of the infant, when I have been able to acknowledge and embrace my brokenness, my weakness, my inability. In his beautiful song “Anthem” Leonard Cohen says,

Ring the bells that still can ring  
Forget your perfect offering  
There is a crack, a crack in everything  
That’s how the light gets in

It is the cracks that let the light in. Those weaknesses, frailties, failures, and defeats, I fight so hard to hide are in fact a gift, a means of God's grace.

## **Descent**

You see it is not my poverty that is the problem. It is my resistance to my poverty that brings death into my life. This is why Jesus insisted, "***It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God!***" (Mark 10:24) I have tried so hard to make myself big, to accumulate accolades and praises. And the bigger I have become, the harder it has been for me to know that divine reality for which my heart longs. It is only when I am willing to be small that I am able to perceive God's presence.

In case you think this is merely Christian masochistic self-flagellation, let me read you the Buddhist nun Pema Chodron's description of the spiritual life. In her book, *When Things Fall Apart*. Pema writes,

Spiritual awakening is frequently described as a journey to the top of a mountain. We leave our attachments and our worldliness behind and slowly make our way to the top. At the peak we have transcended all pain. The only problem with this metaphor is that we leave all the others behind – our drunken brother, our schizophrenic sister, our tormented animals and friends. Their suffering continues, unrelieved by our personal escape.

In the process of discovering bodhichitta, the journey goes down, not up. It's as if the mountain pointed towards the center of the earth instead of reaching into the sky. Instead of transcending the suffering of all creatures, we move toward the turbulence and doubt. We jump into it. We slide into it. We tiptoe into it. We move toward it however we can. We explore the reality and unpredictability of insecurity and pain, and we try not to push it away. (91,92)

In Christian tradition this is called simply the way of the cross. It is the way Jesus walked in the garden of Gethsemane at the time of his arrest. Matthew the Gospel writer describes the scene saying,

A large crowd with swords and clubs, came and laid hands on Jesus. Suddenly, one of those with Jesus put his hand on his sword, drew it, and struck the slave of the high priest cutting off his ear. Then Jesus said to him, 'Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels.' (Matthew 26:50-53)

A Roman legion consisted of 6,000 soldiers. Jesus is saying here that he has unlimited power at his disposal. He can put an end to all his suffering and pain in an instant. But Jesus has dealt with the temptations power presents. He refuses to use the power he has to protect himself. He refuses to use his power to alleviate his own suffering. Instead, Jesus surrenders all those things to which we cling in the hope of keeping ourselves safe. He lays down his power. He surrenders his position of privilege; he lets go of any protection. He comes out from behind the high wall. This gesture of surrender allows life to be born and true strength to emerge.

## **Surrender**

Surrender is not weakness. Surrender is not submission. It is simply the willingness to give up resistance to what is. In surrender we acknowledge the realities of life as they are.

In 2001 Robert Kull travelled to a remote uninhabited island in Patagonia. He spent a year in complete solitude. Out of this experience Kull wrote a beautiful book called *Solitude: Seeking Wisdom in Extremes*. It is an extraordinarily, at times painfully honest book, filled with wisdom and insight into the human

condition. On page 126 Kull sums up some of the insight he discovered in his island hermitage writing,

Here, I'm trying to allow myself to experience the wind and the fear. In that willing embrace there is freedom... Deep peace and harmony seem to arise when I surrender to the flow of the world, not when I'm analyzing it or staying busy to shut it out. (p. 126)

The path to freedom lies along the way of "willing embrace." We come into the fullness of ourselves as we "surrender to the flow of the world." There is an energy at the heart of creation. In Christian tradition we call this reality "God," and we hold that this life-force wants what is best for us and that our destiny lies along the path of cooperation not resistance.

But how do I get there? How do I come to this place of surrender within myself? How do I get to this place of strength from which it no longer seems necessary to fight back? How do I reprogram all of those instinctive clutching, grasping, holding-on instincts with which I am so familiar?

### **Silence**

I have no doubt there are many ways to arrive at the place where we are willing and able to lay down our swords and stop the endless futile battle to protect ourselves from the threats we perceive on the horizon. In "My Spirituality" the practice of letting go has been learned in silence. The practice of meditation, or silent prayer has been the discipline over the past fifteen years that has enabled "My Spirituality" to grow into something that has shaped my life in new and healthy ways.

I was not always a good candidate for silence. I love words. Words have fed and inspired me for many years. I have read, written and spoken more words than is probably healthy for any one person. I used to believe words held the key to the

spiritual life. I believed words could encapsulate truth and contain the hidden invisible mysteries of God. I thought that when the prophets thundered forth from the pages of the Bible crying out, “Thus saith the Lord,” that I was reading the very words of the divine Creator bringing liberation and salvation to all people.

Then one day, I discovered that even words that purport to be from God, or about God, or inspired by God, are not always used by those who wield them to bring freedom and new life in the lives of those they address. I discovered to my shock, that the very words I had understood to be speaking about the reality of love and life could be used to bring death and bondage. I discovered that it was possible to hide behind words and to create a walled fortress with language whose only purpose was to protect the position of power and privilege of the speaker.

The violent purpose to which language could be put came as a terrible shock to me and created a deep crisis in my life. Suddenly, the words I had once believed to be sacred now made me scared. Words that I had thought were healing seemed instead to be used to create hell and drive those who disagreed into a pit of fire. Words I had thought were meant to create peace instead created paralysis and pain. I had been robbed of my words of faith.

Confused and bewildered, I did the only thing I knew how to do; I looked for a book to help. I found on my bookshelf a book I had owned but not opened for twelve years. I know it was twelve years because the book was a gift and the person who gave it to me had written on the inside cover, “To Christopher on his ordination to the Diaconate May 1980. With very best wishes and every blessing.” Then he signed it, “Grahame Baker, Dean of Ontario.” Curiously, the person who gave me this book in 1980 was once the Rector of this very church in which we are now gathered.

When Grahame Baker gave me Thomas Merton's book *Love and Living*, I relegated it to the section of my bookshelf labelled in my mind "Unlikely to ever be read." At the time, I knew almost nothing about Thomas Merton. I knew only that he was a Roman Catholic monk. I thought he had something to do with eastern religious practices. And in my little mind at the time, this made him a figure of suspicion, someone I was pretty sure could have nothing to say to me. But now the voices I had once trusted were letting me down. They no longer spoke to my heart. I was ready to try almost anything to rekindle my faith. So I picked up Thomas Merton and began to read.

I looked at my copy of *Love and Living* recently and discovered I had underlined something on almost every page. But it was when I got to page 18, that the journey that became "My Spirituality" was really launched. Half way down the page, I had underlined a passage in which Merton wrote,

Christianity is a religion of the Word. The Word is Love. But we sometimes forget that the Word emerges first of all from silence. When there is no silence, then the One Word which God speaks is not truly heard as Lover. Then only 'words' are heard. "Words" are not love, for they are many and Love is One. Where there are many words, we lose consciousness of the fact that there is really only One Word. The One Word which God speaks is Himself. Speaking. He manifests Himself as infinite Love. (18)

Somehow, my heart opened when I read Merton's words. I knew that what I had been seeking was not more "words" but the one Word that "emerges first of all from silence." I could hear the voice of John the Gospel writer saying,

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John 1:1-4, 14)

The problem with words is that they are often static. So often words are used to try to define and solidify. They are used to build walls, fight battles, define who is bad and who is good, who is in and who is out. But the Word about which John spoke was an event, a moving, living power at work in the world and in the lives of those whose hearts would open to that work.

So, I set about learning how to open my heart. I set about finding the way to let down the walls I had built around myself, finding ways to give up needing to be in control, needing to fight to win, to prove to the world what a valuable and worthwhile person I really am. I understood that the path was silence and Merton taught me that the goal was a place I had never even known existed.

## **The Centre**

In *Love and Living* Merton wrote about the purpose and power of symbols. He said a symbol has the power to open

the believer's inner eye, the eye of the heart, to the realization that he **must come to be centered in God because that, in fact, is where his center is.** He must become what he is, a 'son of God,' 'seeking only his Father's will,' abandoned to the invisible Presence and Nearness of Him Who Is, for there is no reality anywhere else but in Him. (75)

This is the key. So much of my life had been lived excentrically (that is not eccentrically though perhaps that too) but **excentrically**, that is, without a centre, or with too many centres.

So often I had made the centre of my life my job, how I might look to my colleagues. My centre had been my own personal comfort, or my family, or my

financial stability. And whatever is at the centre becomes the guiding, shaping, formative reality of your life. This is why Jesus said, “***No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other.***” (Matthew 6:24) It is not possible to live with more than one centre. When we try to live with more than one centre our lives become fragmented, confused, conflicted. We find ourselves running frantically from one thing to another, attempting to keep too many balls in the air at the same time. We are trying to please too many masters.

To “come to be centered in God, because that in fact is where your center is,” is to find the forces of your life drawn together and integrated. This is what the New Testament means when it talks about “salvation.” “Salvation” is not simply the promise of a pleasing reward in the sweet by and by. “Salvation” is living as a whole person in the present moment. It means bringing the whole of yourself to the table. It means you engage life as an integrated being.

If we are going to be saved, that is made whole, we must let those other things that have drifted to the centre of our lives, go back to the periphery where they belong. We must be willing to find the one true centre that is God.

For me, the thing that helps me let the other forces of my life go back to the edges so that I might rest in my true centre, is the discipline of silent, meditative prayer. In fact the form of meditation I practice is called “Centering Prayer.” It takes its name from the writings of Thomas Merton. To practice Centering Prayer is to practice letting go of all those things that so fill my life with the chatter and clatter of their demented demands. It is to fall back into the centre that is my true being and rest in the presence of God.

In prayer, I cease all my striving; I let go of my need to perform, to measure up, to be good enough, smart enough, or even particularly capable. In prayer, I find myself in that place where there is nothing left to prove, nowhere else to get, nothing left to accomplish.

In the entranceway of the church where I work, we have a beautiful batik hanging. I don't know how many people who come to St. Philip's church have ever really noticed it. But, if you look carefully, you will see that stencilled on this hanging is an invitation; it says, "enter God's rest." The words are taken from the New Testament letter to the Hebrews which says, "*a Sabbath rest still remains for the people of God; for those who enter God's rest also cease from their labours as God did from his.*" (Hebrews 4:10,11)

These words call deeply to my heart. I long to know this place of rest. I long to cease the frantic rush for more, bigger, better. I think we are all weary of the clamour to accumulate, whether it be possessions, power, prestige, or privilege. We know in our hearts we have been chasing a fantasy and we long to find that place of rest where we can simply be at peace.

### **Action**

Whenever I talk about resting in God, someone immediately raises the prospect that what I am advocating is escapist and self-indulgent. But the reality is that the centre in which I rest is not an inert void. When I pray I rest in the presence of God. And in my Christian faith I understand the nature of God to be fundamentally the nature of love. And love is never inert. Love is not passive. Love always compels me back into the world to encounter life with a renewed vitality, creativity, compassion, and kindness.

I don't know if you are aware of the work of the social activist and documentary filmmaker Velcrow Ripper. He made the films "Scared Sacred" and "Fierce Light." In these films Velcrow Ripper travels the world seeking places of hope and finding people who are working for peace, compassion, and kindness. In a recent interview Velcrow said, "We need that deep inner knowing. We need that meditative centre. That's what gives us the strength and the soul to deal with the world in crisis. Then we need to be active to bring about the change we desire to see."

Ripper encourages us to start in the right place where all truly compassionate caring must start. He asks us to find a compassionate heart. I have to be changed from the inside first. Action that is motivated by anger, resentment, guilt, bitterness, or manipulation will only bring more violence into the world. When I start with sitting silently surrendering to God's presence, another dimension comes into my life. My actions are drawn forth from a deep inner knowing that is directed by the Spirit of God rather than by my needs, wants and desires, or even the needs, wants and desires of the world around me.

When I am surrendered I will take action, but my action will come from a completely different place within myself. Surrendered action carries a radically different energy and bears dramatically different fruit than action that emerges from resistance, resentment, rejection, and reactivity. Surrender allows the true strength of my deep inner being to emerge. When I surrender, I see more clearly and I live in tune with the flow of life. My actions flow from that place of life within myself and they have the capacity to bring life rather than death.

You see I came to a point in my life when I was forced to confront the question of what we human beings truly are. When you strip away everything, what is left? When you go to the core of your human nature, what will you find?

To answer this question, I have to go back to the beginning of my talk and introduce you to my two granddaughters. They are now two and a half and six months old. And I have to tell you, when I look into the eyes of Sophianna Avery Koopmans and Isabelle Joy Koopmans, I see a vision of what I was created to be. I see pure light. I see radiant openness. I see softness, gentleness, and complete trust. I believe this is who I am. The Bible says, all human beings have been created in “*the image*” and “*likeness*” of God. (Genesis 1:26)

Nothing in the Bible suggests to me that this image and likeness has ever been eliminated or wiped out from any human being. We may have lost touch with it. We may have forgotten that it is there. We may have lost contact with our true nature. We may so fill our lives with other chaotic clamouring demands and ego projects that we become completely alienated from our true nature. But we never lose that reality. It cannot be destroyed. Velcrow Ripper calls it “the power of our indestructible vulnerability.”

When Jesus accepted the terrible agony of death on a cross he entered into the centre of human vulnerability. And, the Gospels tell us that, on the other side of that vulnerability he uncovered the immense transforming power of love. This is the journey upon which “My Spirituality” has taken me. It is a journey I believe is open to every human being. It is the only journey that really matters. It is the journey out of which will emerge the transforming power of compassion, kindness, goodness, and truth. It is the journey that starts and ends with the invincible vulnerability of love. This is the journey of “My Spirituality.”

Thank you.